

Ten Key Points About Newspaper Format Conversion

By Len Kubas
12 September 2012

If you are considering format conversion as a way to reduce costs and improve your newspaper’s operating effectiveness, here are ten critical points to consider. Format change is fundamentally different from narrowing a broadsheet’s page width. In our experience, converting a broadsheet to a tabloid, Berliner or other compact format requires new operating practices throughout the business. When executed properly, a compact format can reshape your newspaper’s future.

The Top Ten

1. It’s ALL about Managing Advertising Revenues

The cost savings part is straightforward, depending on how the new format is structured. Instead, the key to successful format change is to manage the impact on your newspaper’s print ad revenues. This requires implementing new ways to package, price, and sell advertising. While a well-executed conversion will reduce newsprint and production expense, any unintended ad revenue losses could offset that benefit and could even make format conversion a money-losing proposition.

2. Adopt Page-based or Modular Pricing Now, Before Conversion

In order to protect ROP ad revenue, it’s essential to convert to page-based or modular ad pricing now, while still operating as a broadsheet. Establishing page impact as your newspaper’s pricing currency will make it easier to later shrink the page while holding on to the ad revenue and minimize advertiser pushback. This is somewhat like the magazine pricing model, except that it’s a “building blocks” approach for newspapers.

3. Half a Broadsheet Does Not a Tabloid Make

Today’s narrow broadsheets result in short, squat, and unattractive tabloids that limit editorial and advertising flexibility. This was the case for Chicago Tribune’s approach for their now defunct tabloid edition.

Instead, The Burlington Free Press expanded its web width to create a 15” depth tab and a more pleasing portrait look when it converted format in June 2012.

For further comment on the Chicago situation, please see [Lessons from Chicago Tribune’s Ill-Fated Tabloid Edition](#).



4. Redesign and Integrate Print and Digital

Use smart redesign to create a comprehensive editorial and advertising template that integrates both print and digital platforms. Use your newspaper's website and other digital assets (mobile, social, etc.) to amplify stories and to provide more images and video. Use these creative approaches to counter arguments that readers are getting "less" with a smaller format.

5. More Color is a Big Plus

Both readers and advertisers prefer more colorful publications. As a tabloid, the number of available color pages will double, providing more potential impact and revenues, even with many older presses. Craft an integrated marketing/sales program in order to expand color usage. Enhanced color availability can also help sell the compact format to advertisers.

6. Resolve Legacy Pricing and Sales Practices

Most newspapers today are saddled with complicated and troublesome pricing legacies, including advertiser-specific rates, unwarranted discounts, and inconsistent special deals. Complete a thorough advertising audit of how and what advertisers are buying, and how much they are spending, prior to setting pricing for a smaller format. Going to compact provides a golden opportunity to simplify and standardize pricing and significantly curb counterproductive sales practices.

7. Lever This: Readers Prefer Compact Formats

Research around the world documents that readers prefer smaller newspapers because they are more convenient and easier to read and handle. And there's also good news for advertisers. Compact formats usually attract a younger audience as well as more female readers. A new compact format has the potential to boost readership and circulation, which can also mean increased revenue from readers and more insert advertising.

8. Expand Your Marketing, Research, and Communications

The Guardian demonstrated that successful compact conversion requires a major investment in creative marketing, research, and communications. Newspapers must rely on reputable research to substantiate the benefits of compact in order to address advertiser and reader concerns.

9. Involve Your Advertisers Up Front

Advertisers don't like surprises. Open and frank discussions with advertisers early on provide an opportunity to defuse potential problems, while documenting the benefits that the compact format and new pricing strategies can deliver. Use this dialogue regarding format change to learn more about what your customers want, while reinforcing a mutually beneficial relationship based on savvy pricing that delivers better results.

10. Make Your Internal Stakeholders a Priority

It's essential that everyone representing your newspaper is on the same page (pun intended) and understands how compact format works better for all parties. It will be much tougher to communicate the benefits of compact with your external partners if the internal organization is skeptical or doesn't truly believe. Do not underestimate how important having the home team onside will be to your newspaper's future.

Turning a New Page

When properly implemented, a new compact format, combined with modular pricing, provides an opportunity to save costs, grow revenues, improve profitability, increase readership and provide advertisers with better results. Your newspaper will need full commitment, sufficient time and adequate resources to make the new format work.

KubasPrimedia has worked with many newspapers over the years to successfully implement modular pricing, compact formats, and related advertising revenue development programs. If you have any questions about how compact and modular can help your newspaper, feel free to contact us.

Len Kubas (len@kubas.com) is Chair of KubasPrimedia (formerly Kubas Consultants), a firm specializing in newspaper pricing structures, revenue development, and publishing strategy. For more information about us, please visit kubas.com/newspaper. More KubasPrimedia articles are available at [Ideas for Newspaper Executives](#).

© Copyright KubasPrimedia. All rights reserved.